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SUBJECT: GOV TAKES ANTI-US TACK ON GRANDA AFFAIR

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Classified By: Political Counselor Abelardo A. Arias for reason 1.4 (d)

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SUMMARY

[11.](#) (C) Venezuelan officials shifted from the battle with Colombia over the capture of FARC leader Rodrigo Granda to anti-US criticism January 19. The officials took advantage of comments regarding Venezuela by the Secretary designate in her Senate confirmation hearings and began painting the Granda affair as an imperialist affront to both Andean countries. Chavez mocked the Secretary designate after a GoV-sponsored march on 23 January and blamed the US for instigating the Colombia-Venezuela crisis. The GoV position had centered on asserting that Colombia had violated its sovereignty following President Hugo Chavez's demand for an apology from his Colombian counterpart January 14. As Colombia maintained its position and international actors sought to calm tensions, the GoV has resorted to tried and true tactics: get all your people out on message, and have that message include blame for the United States. End Summary.

[12.](#) (U) Following the Secretary designate's January 18 testimony in her Senate confirmation hearings, the GoV began to accuse Washington of participating in the capture of FARC leader Rodrigo Granda in Caracas. Most GoV public statements portrayed the US as trying to arrest Latin American unification by sowing discord between Colombia and Venezuela. On January 19, Foreign Minister Ali Rodriguez and Information Minister Andres Izarra lambasted the secretary designate's remarks on Venezuela, and National Assembly first vice president Ricardo Gutierrez said the tone of her remarks served to try to justify the "kidnapping." National Assembly president Nicolas Maduro told the legislature that "the black hand of the United States" was behind the Colombian-Venezuelan conflict.

Bandwagon Jumpers

[13.](#) (C) Chavez supporters--some with direct orders from the GoV--have since rushed to echo the party line on alleged sovereignty violations and US complicity in the Granda case. Aragua Governor Didalco Bolivar told the DCM that the administration sent him a letter urging him to rally his supporters against the sovereignty violation. Other sectors of Chavismo have added their voices to the administration's new spin. For example, a group of pro-Chavez retired military officers delivered a protest note, which alluded to US complicity in Granda's capture, to the Colombian Embassy in Caracas on January 19. Titina Azuaje, the national coordinator of "Clase Media En Positivo," an NGO of pro-Chavez professionals, appeared on the Government television channel for the first time in months to protest Colombian sovereignty violations.

Chavez and the US: The Gloves Come Off

[14.](#) (U) The anti-US recriminations culminated at a Sunday, January 23 "march for sovereignty" to Miraflores, the presidential palace. The GoV brought by bus people from most regions of the country to attend the protest, press reports noted. Some marchers carried anti-US banners decrying "Yankee imperialism and the Colombian oligarchy." According to press reports, some members of the Government-sponsored march shouted support for Granda and demanded that Colombia return him to Venezuela. A simultaneous--although much smaller--opposition march protested the presence of insurgent groups in Venezuela.

[15.](#) (C) Having hinted at the involvement of the USG ("hegemonic groups") in the Granda affair during the previous Sunday's "Alo Presidente" address, Chavez pulled no punches in his 90-minute speech to marchers at Miraflores. He taunted the Secretary designate, using highly offensive

language, and called the crisis over Granda's capture a "provocation" from Washington. State and local leaders also participated in the march and offered the press conspiracy theories about US participation in the Granda capture. "Forget about the FARC," said Miranda Governor Diosdado Cabello, "the fundamental issue is (US designs on) Venezuelan oil."

Diplomacy Discarded

16. (U) The Chavez administration has either spurned or ignored diplomatic efforts by third parties to resolve the impasse. Despite arbitration offers by the OAS, Mexico, Peru, and Brazil, Chavez during his speech to the marchers threatened to freeze relations with Bogota, reiterating a January 14 demand that the GoC recognize it made a mistake and promise it would never again violate Venezuela's sovereignty. Chavez also issued on January 14 a moratorium on all bilateral economic projects, such as a planned oil pipeline. His statement generated panic at the border until the Venezuelan military and locals realized his words did not signal an end of trade. Border commerce remained stunted, however, as the GoV began enforcing checkpoints to deter the smuggling of subsidized Venezuelan gasoline into Colombia. The press reported January 26 that Venezuelan authorities had been holding up 150 trucks carrying 6,000 tons of Colombian coal destined to be exported to the United States via the port of Maracaibo.

17. (C) During his January 24 visit to Maracaibo, econcouns found business leaders grouped in the local Chamber of Commerce extremely concerned about the prospect of an interruption in trade with Colombia. (Zulia state, of which Maracaibo is the capital, has an extensive border with Colombia). They noted that trade between the two countries is relatively balanced, and the pain would be felt on both sides of the border. However, they thought that Chavez was counting on the fact that while Venezuela mainly sends raw materials to Colombia (oil, steel, aluminum), Colombia sends mainly finished products to Venezuela, and thus has more jobs directly at stake.

18. (U) After demanding proof from Colombia that terrorists were active in Venezuelan territory, Vice President Rangel dismissed a list of ten guerrillas supplied by the GoC, calling it "irrelevant." Maduro blasted the list as a US attempt to destabilize Latin America. Rangel also called a US diplomatic note asking foreign capitals to urge Venezuela to deal with the problem of terrorism within its borders "severed from reality" because, unlike the United States, Venezuela enjoyed wide respect in the international community. MVR deputy William Lara said in response to the US note that the GoV would send groups throughout the United States and Latin America to spread the GoV's version of the story.

It's Sovereignty, Stupid

19. (U) After the National Assembly failed to garner unanimous support for a resolution on the defense of Venezuelan sovereignty on 18 January, Rangel met with National Assembly deputies and told them not to "confuse and manipulate the issue by arguing about terrorism." On January 20, the resolution passed with the backing of opposition parties COPEI, MAS, La Causa R, UNT, and Solidaridad after the change of some wording, including the removal of references to the Colombian President and Defense Minister. Opposition parties AD, Primero Justicia, Proyecto Venezuela, and Bloque Social Democratica abstained from voting, arguing that the document was flawed because it did not condemn the presence of terrorists in Venezuela.

COMMENT

10. (C) The Granda affair has sparked muted criticism of the GoV from throughout the political spectrum. Granda's Venezuelan citizenship resonated with the opposition, which was resentful of his protection by Venezuelan law, and the left, which was troubled by rumors that the GoV had sold out a compatriot. In response, the Chavez administration has succeeded in keeping much of local discourse on Venezuelan sovereignty and off terrorism. The hype of both the march and Chavez's follow-on diatribe eclipsed a press report issued the same day that Colombian police had captured another Colombian guerrilla with a Venezuelan citizenship card near the Venezuelan border. Chavez has resorted to his typical tactics for confronting a seemingly intractable problem. He successfully distracts the public from issues at hand because he is adept at turning out all of his supporters to hammer home a unified message: the United States is to

blame.

11. (C) Chavez's effort to show up the GoC has eliminated, at least for the near term, the possibility of a face-saving end to the standoff for either party, as Colombian Foreign Minister Carolina Barco affirmed following a January 27 meeting with Rodriguez that Colombia would not apologize. Chavez probably intends his vaguely worded threat to freeze relations to serve, in the words of former Colombian President Ernesto Samper, as "economic blackmail." Yet Chavez, for whom politics always trumps economics, would not be above cutting off trade with Colombia, even though the cost of such a move to the Venezuelan economy would be substantial.

12. (C) Chavez's moves have reassured Chavistas and the left, and his use of sovereignty and anti-US banners has limited the ability of the opposition to seize on this issue. Chavez has lost ground, we think, with most Latin American governments. We see no indication Chavez would seek a large scale military incursion into Colombia. He may, however, be contemplating an abduction or lure operation against Colombian military or police officers.

BROWNFIELD